

Kurt du Preez



ails are below.

“This is life,” says Kurt du Preez. “You have plans and then off you are sent to the army, chunked on a train to Grahamstown, and once there, you start running like an idiot for six months.” Having had polio at age eleven, Kurt was classified as G3K2, or simply put, someone who had a medical history and was exempt from direct military combat.

Wowing the South Africa market with his skilful lighting design, particularly when it comes to live productions for television, Kurt grew up in Richards Bay in KwaZulu Natal. By the age of 16, he was not only a keen surfer but also worked for a mobile disco company. “There were two of us and we were the most organized DJs in Northern Natal at the time,” he says. “The business was run from a shop instead of a garage and we had good gear.” Maxi singles were the order of the day and two records were used to phase mix, not like today where you just press a button!



Travelling to Stanger and all over the coast, with weddings comprising the bulk of the work, Kurt was also regularly invited as a guest DJ at various night clubs. “There were probably a dozen night clubs in Durban at the time, places like Ruby Tuesdays, Raffles, Father’s Moustache, Club Med they’re all gone now.” Kurt had a contract at the Karos Hotels eight months before going to the army and drove up and down between the Bay Hotel in Richards Bay and the Capital Towers in Pietermaritzburg on Tuesday nights, playing sounds from the 80s.

G3K2 is reputedly the easy life in army terms, and listening to Kurt's tale, he had no reason to complain! In the military band, playing the side drum, Kurt suddenly found himself in Johannesburg. "I had never been to Johannesburg before.... I never knew a mine dump," he smiles. In Johannesburg Kurt was assigned as a PDK, a secretary type clerk. "To add insult to injury, a group came from Kimberley and wanted intelligent people for intelligence, and the next thing I was transferred to Kimberley."

He was placed in Intelligence with the likes of lawyers and educated individuals. "I was having a jol," chuckles Kurt, who had the opportunity to spend a fair amount of time in the pub during this period. "It was actually a good experience and as a Junior Leader I was given rank of lieutenant!" When Kurt did not have a troop to be assigned to (as the August intake was cancelled), he was sent back to Durban. Delegated as a Communications Officer, his duties (surfing aside) included presenting talks to high school girls, explaining to them what young men were exposed to in the force. Kurt remembers giving a presentation over a weekend at the Nyala Game Reserve with scholars from Durban Girls High School. Tough life Kurt!

While the army certainly provided two years of uninterrupted good times, Kurt had to decide what career path to follow. Having recently visited and being impressed by Sun City, Kurt's mom recommended he apply for a position at their Sound Department. She wrote a letter to Sun City and included a photo of Kurt in his army uniform.



While the Sound Department did not have a vacant position, Tom Swan from Sun City, who oversaw the lighting department, needed a lighting technician. Little did Kurt know that Tom would become his mentor, guiding him in all aspects of lighting.

"My dad lived in Benoni at the time," explains Kurt. "I needed to go to Sun City for the interview. My brother said he knew how to get there, but three hours later we were still in Rustenburg."

When Kurt finally arrived attired in a suite and tie, he met Tom Swan, who in turn was dressed in shorts and slops. The entire interview was simply to show Kurt his accommodation and to inform him of his salary – R1 200.00 per month. On 1st August 1988 he officially started his employ. “Nine days later it was my 21st birthday,” laughs Kurt. “The boys at Sun City decided to get me drunk, but they quickly realized that that would cost a lot of money and that I would carry them back home instead.”



With South Africa being boycotted for apartheid, the only international acts that Kurt worked on at Sun City's Superbowl was Laura Branigan and Irene Cara. He spent most of his days programming and operating extravaganzas, the Heavenly Bodies and corporate conferences. Kurt also went on the Chippendale Tour where he worked side by side with John Roughley (JR), then from the Wild Coast. “All this time there were no such thing as moving lights and few desks had memory. Things were a lot simpler,” says Kurt. “We used slide projectors, optikinetics projectors, ACLs and we really had to think what to do. There were no gobos.” One can only imagine how revolutionary the Pink Floyd concert was back then, and of course it was then when Vari-Lite first made its appearance.

Two years at Sun City and a lifestyle of one big party was enough for Kurt. For the following six months, he chose a career in sales. Based in Johannesburg and specialising in the lighting industry, he sold lighting, bulbs and slot machine parts.

Soon Kurt was back in the industry as a freelance lighting technician. He joined Mmabatho Convention Centre in 1993 as a lighting, sound and audio visual technician and then, not long afterwards, was picked up by Seraph Entertainment with Glen Bloomberg. Kurt headed up the lighting division and events included the Pyramid of Light, the Al Jarreau tour, Lucky Dube Video and the Moscow State Circus tour besides others. It was during this stage that he became friends with Mike Jones & Helgard “Elkie ! as we called him”, who also worked at Seraph Entertainment for a stretch.

On a freelance basis, Kurt was involved with some major productions such as Miss World & Miss South Africa .



The popular Idols competition

The movie industry is what would put Kurt in a league of his own, and really assisted him to establish the art of combining camera, rock and roll and theatre lighting. “When working on a movie it’s a twelve hour day and you work your “gat” off,” said Kurt. He worked on the international production Tropical Heat and this sometimes meant playing the double for the head actor of the series!

After three months, Kurt started working with an AV company, and then went on his own. He met Jo-Anne Sudbury, who he later married, and after buying six Track Spots, Kurt took a loan for R500 000.00 from Jo-Anne’s father and Upstage Promotions was officially born 1995.

“Jo and I worked out of a 60sqm flat, hiring televisions and videos to hotels and delivering them with our bakkie,” says Kurt. “We hired a garage from a friend of ours in Rivonia and then bought a home in Douglasdale that had triple garages and a cottage.” Kurt remembers his son as a baby (now nine years old) sitting next to the desk in a donut on the floor. The company grew, and when 15 cars were regularly parked outside on the pavement and the neighbours started complaining, the next door house was purchased for additional space.

Later a home in Bryanston better catered for the expanding business. Then in 2000 the company divided with Kurt running Upstage Lighting and Jo-Anne focussing on Audio Visual, Sound and Stages with Upstage Promotions. Around five years ago, Upstage Lighting and Upstage Promotions joined forces again, and are now conveniently situated in Paulshof.



Upstage has been part of, and will continue to do so, major events such as Idols, Skouspel, Miss South Africa, and a long list of other events, both big and small. On a personal level, Kurt and Jo-Anne have decided to go their separate ways. "The industry has given our kids (two children) the opportunity normal children would not have," says Kurt. "They have been all over the world, can jump on a lighting desk and play, and I can't believe their confidence, people skills and life skills."

Kurt is passionate about lighting and the contribution it lends to a show. "When the House lights go down and the people stamp their feet I like to believe that the lighting operator does add something. If it wasn't doing something, we wouldn't have an industry."

Kurt admits that his biggest obsession has been computer games, though it has been the very thing that has given him the insight to solve problems. "I had a Spectrum and Commodore 64, and by the age of 12, I was writing my own games," says Kurt. "Don't tell a 14 year old that a game won't run on a computer! At the end of the day, my electronics knowledge is self-taught because of fiddling. I have got to know lights by looking, listening and watching. I see simplicity."

Regrets have been not learning to read music, but it would appear that Kurt has ceased each moment, and every opportunity that has come his way. Somehow he has fitted in additional loves such as photography and diving, and of course, we would be failing if we did not mention his full Star Trek & Sci-Fi collection, episode by episode – on both video and CD!

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See Kurt's group on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=112885178772853>